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Preface:

The Alps are changing, Alpine research is changing: what are the challenges, specific features and future prospects?

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Preface

The Alps are changing, Alpine research is changing: what are the challenges, specific features and future prospects?



This issue stems from a round table organised as part of the 100th birthday celebrations of the *Institut de géographie alpine* [Institute for Alpine Geography]. The symbolic nature of the centenary of this time-honoured institute, naturally led us to look back upon the past. But although a retrospective could be expected in this context¹, we did not want to leave it there. Rather, we wanted to move beyond a historical approach, and make it a starting point for an analysis of the conditions and determining factors of Alpine research. What is Alpine research? What is the social, institutional, political and financial rationale defining its nature, organisation and content? Using this understanding of the way in which Alpine research is constructed as a springboard, we were then able to have an open debate on its future prospects, investigating the outlook for this field of research, taking context, challenges, requirements and even the abilities and skills of the key players into account. But this very broad objective is beyond the scope of this issue which will struggle even to touch on all of these subjects. The aim then is to state some premises by introducing some fundamental descriptive principles and considering some problem areas; the epistemology will be explored further at a later date.

Within this scaled-down context of preparation and data collection, we nonetheless wanted to raise three important questions: first on the future of the Alpine space; second on changes in social demands; and third on research programmes and calls for proposals. The Journal of Alpine Research has often taken more of an interest in the first of these questions as it is closely related to researchers' disciplinary expertise². It has often focussed on the relationship between society and the mountains and the resulting policies³, but has less frequently turned its attention to an analysis of public research commissioning. The articles presented here attempt to put all three of these changes into perspective, and by comparing them they seek to reveal how research subjects are relevant to these developments, or demonstrate the autonomy or dependence of research in terms of its ability to create and influence social and political demand. From a scientific rather than a political angle, it can also show the way in which research 'invents' the Alps, how it spreads knowledge and sets out a framework of reference that then goes on to shape portrayals and research projects.

1 • Indeed we took this approach, particularly in the collective work *Ces géographes qui écrivent les Alpes*, coordinated by M.C. Fourny and A. Sgard, Journal of Alpine Research, coll. Ascendances, 2007, Grenoble.

2 • *Prospectives and transnational cooperation in the Alps*, issue number 2-2006, led by Martin Vanier.

3 • See, among others: the issue on *the Convention on the Protection of the Alps (Alpine Convention)* which appeared in 1995 (n° 2); in 2001, *La montagne : un objet de recherche [mountains as a research subject]* (n° 2) and more recently the volume on *Mountains of Europe – Stakeholders, Legitimization and Delineation* which appeared in 2004 (n° 2).

And we can go even further than this. When reflexive and retrospective analysis meets prospective analysis, an understanding of a research idea develops. To a certain extent, alpine research came into being alongside Alpine geography. Working for the Institute of Alpine Geography in Grenoble, Raoul Blanchard has set the stage with his geography of the Alps that is more than simply regional geography, and has taken on a scientific significance and an identity of its own reflected through the term 'Alpine geography'. This relationship between a research 'idea' and a specific spatial area is not generally very common, and is particularly unusual in the Alps and in Humanities. So what are we left with? Alpine research today covers a complex reality that is difficult to define. It has a history and heritage that gives it its identity and renown, but it also benefits from political and social recognition that enables it to assume an active and effectual role in the Alps. It possesses institutes, communication bodies, key events, and active and international networks. Alpine research also has its own geography; it is spatially structured and involves a specific 'environment' of researchers. But what has it constructed and given rise to? What has it facilitated? Its Alpine scope has been enlarged and has given it knowledge and legitimacy enabling it to investigate mountain areas in general, as Thomas Scheurer and Anne Sgard demonstrate here.

This issue presents articles that are slightly different to scientific articles in so much as the researchers do not evaluate subjects falling within their area of expertise, but rather within the scope and context of their professional practice. They tackle them from various viewpoints, showing the manifold ways to present the interaction between a spatial area and the research that investigates it.

Axel Borsdorf paints a precious and rare portrait of Alpine research through his exhaustive treatment of the subject, showing a complex and dense structure that is organised around institutes, networks and programmes of varying scales. He also shows how Alpine research has come to spearhead research into mountain areas in general thanks to the capital it has accumulated. This certainly implies that we can attempt to understand mountains as a whole through knowledge of the Alps – a hypothesis that Thomas Scheurer also develops in a retrospective approach to what we now call Alpine research, and that is also explored by Jean-Jacques Brun who tackles networks and organisational methods in current Alpine research.

Each of these three authors contributes in their own way to depicting a scene in which environmental problems clearly emerge. These problems give the Alps special 'laboratory' status and enable research to develop a relevance that goes beyond the specific sites being analysed. This change to research commissioning and research areas can be explained by the environmental challenges facing mountain areas. But it also contributes to the portrayal of mountain areas as a common good, focusing work and representations on certain mountain characteristics. This in turn introduces the risk of a hegemonic expert's view determining the specific features of Alpine research and giving direction to its various projects. This presentation enables us for example to see the disappearance of the mountains' industrial dimension – that was so significant at the beginning of the twentieth century – and equally of the tourism dimension which attracted attention during the second half of the century.

Philippe Schoeneich and Carmen de Jong confirm the Alps' status as a mountain laboratory in the analysis of climate change. In fact, Alpine altitude and relief combine to make the changes more complex and also open up a range of possibilities. This complexity requires new conceptualisations; indeed the authors assert that we need to set out new analytical frameworks to tackle the situations to come.

Bernard Debarbieux, on the other hand, takes an opposing view. Tackling the concepts to be used in order to understand these emerging phenomena, he demonstrates the topicality of Alpine analysis in terms of flux. This approach is not new; authors such as Raffestin and Racine have long insisted on exchanges of people and goods in the structure and development of an Alpine mountain identity, even going as far as considering it to be one "gigantic switching centre" (Raffestin, 1999). Bernard Debarbieux calls for symbolic and energy exchanges, or even the circulation of portrayals, vectored by research, to be integrated into the model.

In all of these different approaches, we can see the dynamic between spatial phenomena and the ideas used to analyse them. The conceptual innovation that these developments give rise to sources its inspiration in the heritage and cognitive capital accumulated by research. And the overall message is very positive: Alpine research now faces critical challenges, but it has a capacity for organisation, mobilisation and reflection that enables it to tackle them and to become a key player in the future of the space it analyses, rather than simply acting as an observer.

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